The Jazz Singer

By Ron Hutchinson

It wasn't the first talking picture. Or even the thousandth. But "The Jazz Singer" leveraged the convergence of technology, studio ambition, and an electric personality to become the first *successful* synchronized feature with talking. And starting with the film's premiere, there was to be no turning back to silents.

For nearly three decades, studios saw every attempt at synchronizing picture and sound as the surest way to lose a fortune. Beginning in 1896, dozens of systems were developed and promptly failed. Most tried to synchronize a flat or cylinder record to a separate projector. Edison's Kinetophone failed in part because rats liked to chew on the pulleys connecting a cylinder phonograph with the projector. Some systems had actors lip synch to a pre-recorded record. Every system's Achilles' Heel could be traced to three primary factors: lack of foolproof synchronization, the inability to fill a theatre with sound from a horn phonograph, and less than realistic acoustic sound recording.

Since the movie industry was very lucrative, the studios saw no need to tamper with success.

An ad promoting the film and its star. Courtesy Ron Hutchinson.

But when Sam Warner, the most visionary of the Warner brothers, was bowled over by Bell Labs' demonstration of a new sound film system in 1925, he saw those technical roadblocks evaporate. Using one motor to drive both the projector and the turntable holding the 16" soundtrack disk, the Vitaphone system also used state-of-the-art electrical sound recording, and could fill theatres with natural sound via newly developed loudspeakers. To give Warner Bros a step up in the Hollywood hierarchy, Sam saw Vitaphone as a way of providing theatres with full orchestral accompaniment to their silent pictures, not for talking. But audience response to the talking/singing shorts preceding their first Vitaphone-ed feature "Don Juan" (1926) changed all that. Audiences wanted synchronized *talking and singing* rather than silent pictures with music and sound effects.

The studio released more silent films with Vitaphone accompaniment over the next year, but in early 1927 announced that contract star George Jessel would appear in an adaptation of his Broadway hit, "The Jazz Singer." The studio was urged by director Ernst Lubitsch to buy the play. While Jessel later claimed he thought it would be a silent film, it's unclear if that was ever the plan. Both he and "The World's Greatest Entertainer" Al Jolson appeared in talking shorts on the same program preceding the synchronized silent feature "The Better 'Ole" in late 1926. The Jolson short electrified the audience. Jessel's not so much.

Warner Brothers decided that "The Jazz Singer" needed Jolson to ensure attention and success, not only for the film but for Vitaphone itself. Production began in early summer 1927 with shooting of location scenes in New York. Meanwhile, the Sunset Boulevard studio was wired for sound. Jolson's singing and talking sequences were shot over nine consecutive days beginning on August 17. Most were filmed from 1 to 5 PM, with three simultaneously running cameras recording the sound onto a single disk master. The first Vitaphone-ed song was "It All Depends On You" and was completed in seven takes. While the story may be apocryphal, it is said when Jolson started having second thoughts about the production, the studio told him Jessel was willing to take over.

As Jolson became more comfortable, things went quicker. Songs "Mother of Mine" took just 2 takes, and the finale with "Mammy" was shot the same day in three. For reasons unknown. "Blue Skies" replaced "It All Depends On You", and is the only scene with real dialog. Many myths surround this scene

with Eugenie Besserer as Jolson's mother. While his banter with her was ad-libbed, the idea that Jolson was not expected to speak is untrue. His contract for his 1926 Vitaphone short specifically states he will sing and *speak*. Nevertheless, his lines about moving to the Bronx are not in the script, so he probably came up with the dialog himself.

This scene with Jolson and Besserer is a true watershed in the transition from silents to talkies. It blends music, talking, *and* the biggest personality in show business. Warner Brothers were unsure how the scene would play with audiences, and knew since it did not advance the plot, it could be cut if necessary. It stayed.

Premiering in just two theatres on October 6, 1927, "The Jazz Singer" was in fact largely silent, with music and sound effects covering those portions. There were just 2 minutes of actual dialog. Initially, projectionist contended with 25 separate Vitaphone disks, eventually reduced to ten. Reviews were decidedly mixed, with many commenting on Jolson's "hammy" performance, and the "New York Herald Tribune" calling it "A pleasant enough sentimental orgy." Some tickets for the premiere were still available that morning.

It didn't matter. The death knell of silent pictures had been sounded. By March 1928 the film was showing in 235 theatres, being the only feature with dialog and singing at the time. Costing $422,000, by 1931 it had earned $2 million. And as Warners opened each new theatre, "The Jazz Singer" was often the first film shown.

The transition to sound, driven by the film's success, drove Warner's expansion, purchases of hundreds of theatres and First National studios, and its stock price from $21 to $132 per share.

The studio announced that all future features would be offered with synchronized Vitaphone accompaniment. In 1928, the first all talking feature, "The Lights of New York," debuted. Costing Warners just $23K, it grossed over a million dollars. Jolson's next film, "The Singing Fool" (1928), cost less than "The Jazz Singer" but with much more dialog, it grossed $4 million and was the biggest Hollywood moneymaker until "Gone with the Wind."

In the end, "The Jazz Singer" is what started it all. By the end of 1929 --- just two years after the film's premiere, the silent picture was dead, and an entire industry had reinvented itself more completely --- than any industry in the world.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Ron Hutchinson is the founder of The Vitaphone Project. Begun in 1991, the Project seeks out soundtrack disks for early talkie shorts and features, and to date has uncovered nearly 600 in private hands worldwide. Working with UCLA, The Library of Congress, and George Eastman House, the Project has brought archives, studios (primarily Warner Brothers) and private collectors together to restore nearly 150 sound shorts and a dozens features. Their website is at www.vitaphoneproject.com and they also maintain a Facebook page.